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Emancipation of Bimala in the Fiction and Film: Ghare Baire

Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore's most famous political novel *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*) has been transcreated by the distinct creative film-maker, Satyajit Ray through visual media. In this creative endeavour sometimes Ray has deviated from the original text. At the backdrop of the Swadeshi Movement the novel, on the one hand, delineates the nationalist zeal and on the other, highlights the triad relationship of Nikhil, his wife Bimala and his friend Sandip. The dual authorship of Tagore and Ray depicted Bimala, the central female protagonist, as an evolving woman representing Bengal's womanhood and championing the Swadeshi Movement in the outside world. Bimala is transformed from a submissive traditional Hindu stereotype woman to a modern woman who can exercise her free will and manifest a new concept of nation and woman in Bengal. Thus both Tagore and Ray emancipated femininity in their works by accentuating the gendered image of nation as epitomized by 'Mokshi Rani', Bimala.

Keywords: Bimala, emancipation, film, novel, womanhood

In Bengali Film industry, Rabindranath Tagore's timeless literary works have always attracted the distinct creative film-makers like Satyajit Ray, Rituparno Ghosh, Tapan Sinha, Suman Mukhopadhyay and others. From 1920's to the present day, Tagore's texts are

recreated as cinema, showing at the same time the marked transformation of Indian cinema from the silent era to the talkies and from black and white to coloured films. Tagore himself recognized cinema (film-making) as a powerful genre, a potential tool of mass appeal. In this regard, mention must be made of *Natir Puja*, his debut film as a director. Edward Thompson in a letter to Tagore on 16th April 1935 wrote : "... what lovely films could be made of your *Chitrangada*, *Kacha and Devayani*, your *Hungry Stones*, your *Karna and Kunti*".(224) But it is also true that the solitary endeavour of writing a novel is quite different from that of making a film which requires talented artists, technical equipments, financial support and extensive promotion to attract the mass. The cinematic presentation of a literary text need not be the toto replica of the source text. A film-maker basically re-arranges, re-negotiates and transcreates an original text to present through visual media his perspective of the story. Thus we get a dual authorship of a literary text – an intersemiotic translation from printed form to celluloid version. And in the process of this translation multiple differences may arise between the original text and its visual narration. Dhiman Dasgupta wrote that the intelligent film maker's filmic version would have a lot of difference from the original literary text.

James Monaco, the famous film critic and theorist asserts: "The words on the page are always the same, but the image on the screen changes continually as we direct our attention. Film in this way, is a much richer experience".(54) These images, metaphors, signifiers abundantly found in the works of Tagore are presented in an innovative visual narrative style by the torch bearer in the history of Indian cinema, the Oscar winner, Satyajit Ray. Tagore's texts translated into films not only provide aesthetic beauty and commercial success but also emphasize some of the vital issues - 'spirit of universal humanism', 'gender role', 'the politics of the sexualised body' and 'body images'. Both in Tagore's works and in Ray's

films women occupied a central position like Charu of *Charulata* or Bimala of *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*).

This paper would explore how Tagore depicted the concept of new woman through the character of Bimala in his novel *Ghare Baire* and the way Ray projected her in the film. The story was set in colonial India when Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, following the 'divide and rule' policy decided the partition of Bengal; one for the Hindus in the west of the province and the other for Muslims in the east. After the partition, Swadeshi, a national movement was launched, appealing for the boycott of foreign goods. The Hindus could afford the boycott but the poor deprived minor Muslims couldn't. Soon a communal tension followed which ultimately took the form of a riot. This Swadeshi Movement formed the background of the novel. Women emerging from their household constraints actively participated in the movement which ultimately initiated their liberation. Thus we find the orthodox woman Bimala emerges from her seclusion for the greater cause of nation.

The novel has three principle characters Nikhil, his wife Bimala and his friend Sandip, the radical revolutionary leader. The story unfolds from the points of view of these three characters as a series of diaries, beginning and ending with Bimala's. The novel mainly focuses on the Swadeshi Movement as well as on the triad relationship of these characters. But in Ray's visual transcreation Bimala becomes the focal point of attraction.

At the very outset of the novel, Bimala is presented as a very lively character who epitomizes the clash of an Indian woman steeped in Bengali tradition and culture with the outside world. She is not an emblematic beauty like Queen Cleopatra, Charu of *Charulata* or Ketaki of *Shesher Kabita*. She is presented as a submissive wife of an aristocratic family.

From the very beginning we find Bimala living a life of traditional Hindu woman expressing her desire to mould herself on her mother's ideal:

Mother, today there comes back to my mind the vermillion mark at the parting of your hair, the sari which you used to wear, with its wide red border, and those wonderful eyes of yours, full of depth and peace. They came at the start of my life's journey, like the first streak of dawn, giving me golden provision to carry me on my way.... All that remained for me to ask of my God in reparation was, that I might grow up to be a model of what woman should be, as one reads it in some epic poem.(19)

Bimala lives in the inner apartment (Antarmahal) of the house. Worshipping her husband like a living god in this mortal life, she formed the habit of taking the dust off her husband's feet while leaving bed in the morning. Thus she conforms to the stereotypical role of an ideal, docile, duty-bound, devoted housewife that patriarchal hegemonic paradigm had dictated to women through ages. But Tagore in a novel manner has jeopardized this dominating role of patriarchy through the character of Nikhilesh who is often considered by many critics as Tagore's spokesman. Nikhil, an English-educated nationalist man wants his wife to emerge out of purdah into the world. As a liberal humanist, he wants his wife to learn English language and manners and engages an English governess, Miss Gilby to instruct her. In this way the kind of freedom Nikhil has sort to give his wife is the more cultured and enlightened version of woman's independence. He wants Bimala to be no more a traditional submissive wife like Sita of *Ramayana* but to be Durga, the Goddess of Bengal. His desire is to make her a free woman who will choose to love her husband, not because custom dictates it, but because she willingly chooses to. Thus Tagore expresses his views about women through his character Nikhil.

But Bimala's life completely changes with the advent of Nikhil's friend Sandip, the fiery nationalist leader. At this point under the influence and infatuation of the impressive oratory of Sandip, Bimala sheds her ideals of traditional woman and visualizes herself as the sole representative of womanhood championing the Swadeshi movement. In the crescendo of violence the storm of Swadeshi had so much effect on her that she proposed to burn her foreign clothes and wanted to get rid of her English teacher. Sandip's well calculated adoration of Bimala as 'Queen Bee', the symbol of Mother India is irresistible to her which gradually distances her from her husband. Bimala laid her heart bare for Sandip, found in him all that might be cherished and pursued and even felt that her husband's idealism quite little by the side of largeness of Sandip's feeling and assertion. Sandip presents himself as a person ready to sacrifice his all for the sake of the motherland but gets an exposure when Bimala discovers that Sandip does not wish to undergo any individual sacrifice - that he likes to travel in train only in first class, smokes expensive cigars, lives in a moderately expensive mode. This facet to get physical satisfaction in the character of Sandip makes Bimala realize her mistake. The theft which Bimala is forced to make by Sandip is the crucial point that marks her reverse journey from Sandip to Nikhil. Another reason of Bimala's return is Amulya who makes her realise the pure gold in Nikhil. Thus Tagore manifests in the novel two sides of patriarchy - one (Nikhil) wants Bimala to become a free woman, gather experience from both the worlds (inner and outer), to blossom fully as a modern woman and exercise free will, the other (Sandip) turns her into a Goddess, wanting her agency to serve his own purposes and benefits. Tagore ends the novel with Nikhil's fatal wound in the Hindu-Muslim riot and Sandip's cowardly escape to the North, after sparking the fire of violence. Bimala's predicament is a complex one with unpredictable future. Tagore thus presents Bimala as a new concept of nation and woman.

The film version of the fiction was released in the year 1984 where Satyajit Ray expanded and furthered the novelist's vision. The film was produced by National Film Development Corporation of India and the casting of the significant characters of the film were as follows: Soumitra Chatterjee as Sandip Mukherjee, Victor Banerjee as Nikhilesh Choudhury(Nikhil), Swatilekha Chatterjee as Bimala Choudhury, Indrapramit Roy as Amulya and Jennifer Kapoor as Miss Gilby. Ray's linear narration uses the camera as the third person to comment on the subjective gaze of the characters that defines, reveals and intervenes. Ray projected the whole film in a flashback technique with Bimala occupying the central focus. Amidst the blazing fire image the title of the film appears *Ghare Baire (The Home and the World)* where Ghare (the home) is the cultured household boundary and Baire (the world) is what lies beyond that boundary. Bimala's voice is gradually heard with the recedence of this flare. She emerges out of this fire as a new woman, destroying a part of her own self but what has remained she dedicates to her husband Nikhilesh. This fire image has been employed by Ray several times in the film even at the tragic death of Nikhilesh. Just as Tagore has discussed in written mode the English education of a traditional culture-bound housewife to evolve as a high-minded modern woman, Ray through his audio-visual mode meticulously presented this education of Bimala like English etiquette of pouring tea, singing English ditties and reading English books with the aid of Miss Gilby, the role played by Jennifer Kapoor with perfection. For the first time Ray through his lens presents sexuality and sexual attraction through the triad relationship where Bimala is depicted more as a woman of flesh and blood, of desire and drive, than just bearing the image of an idealized Indian woman. Ray sensualises Bimala by showing two kissing sequences in the film – first sequence when Sandip kisses her and she clings to him and the second when realizing the actual hypocritical self-centered nature of Sandip, she returns to Nikhilesh for forgiveness as a guilt-conscious image. Thus a new independent Bimala emerges, burnt in the fire of

passion and cleansed in the flame of truth and love. Partha Chatterjee in his essay '*The Nation and Its Women*' states:

Applying the inner/outer distinction to the matter of day to day living separates the social space into ghar and bahir, the home (represented by woman) and the world (represented by man). The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity.(120)

Ray's Sandip tells Nikhilesh before his final departure, "These are indeed times for breaking rules. Your wife has come out of doors (baire) while, I have entered into the interior space (ghare)".(265) Ray also accentuates the gendered image of nation through Sandip's 'Mokshi Rani' Bimala.

The ending of the novel has been re-scripted by Ray when he shows the death of Nikhilesh, departure of Sandip and Bimala's close up image of being transformed from that of wife to a widow wearing a white sari. However, in the novel, it is Amulya, the high-school boy whose role Ray expanded in the film, dies and the survival of Nikhilesh remains unpredictable. Thus the dual authorship pictures Bimala as an evolving woman, representative of Bengal's womanhood, champion of the Swadeshi in the outside world and also as a woman who suffers like a progressive soul from virtue to vice and then returning to virtue itself. To conclude both the creative artist, Tagore and Satyajit Ray gave agency to the emancipated femininity in their works, changing the condition and archetype roles of women in Indian society as epitomized by Bimala in *Ghare Baire*.

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